GLORY ALL AROUND
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Psalm 96
Luke 2:1–20

Dear God, as your glory came in the night, on the hillside to shepherds at their work,
so startle us this quiet morning once again with your surprising truth and your love and your grace in Jesus Christ. Amen.

The annual children's Christmas pageant is one of the most beloved—and from my perspective—best church traditions around. Happily, it is in the midst of a kind of cultural renaissance, if you can use that term, here at Fourth Presbyterian Church. Christmas pageants—"bathrobe dramas," the cynical called them, after the oversized bathrobes the shepherds wore—were out of style for a while. Recent seminary graduates, for instance, are inclined to find the Christmas pageant they inevitably inherit in their first church a necessary evil, full of far too much sentimentality, not to mention historic inaccuracies bordering on the outrageous. There was a time, I confess, when I leaned in that direction. And then there is the director to contend with, who emerges out of the congregation each October and pretty much takes over the church with all the plans, costumes, sets, and, of course, the critical choice of who gets which role—Mary and Joseph, for obvious reasons, being the potential stars. So the freshly minted clergyperson tries carefully, but foolishly, to pull the rug out from under the entire enterprise and replaces it with a four-part seminar on the doctrine of the incarnation, which nobody attends. Replaces it until he or she actually knows some of the children who are the actors and actresses or actually has an offspring participating. That, I can tell you, changes everything. To see a child you know in the angel choir or one of your own in the flock of sheep, standing around the manager gazing angelically at the doll representing the Christ child, can be a profound religious experience. (I now know, having experienced it in several iterations, that it's a little easier for grandparents, aunts, uncles, and friends than for parents, for whom the whole deal can be traumatic. Who knows, after all, what your own son or daughter, dressed in an angel gown with halo and wings in place, might actually do!)

One of our grandchildren, on Christmas Eve at four o'clock, took her leave from the angel chorus, which was patiently, and then impatiently, waiting for the sheep and Magi and life-sized camel to arrive—which it did gloriously, almost knocking the first Magi down in the center aisle. My

angel, Rachel, decided to take a tour of the chancel while waiting and did a thorough job—climbing across the seats in the lower chancel, getting her halo and wings all tangled up in the flowers before moving to the upper chancel and finally settling in the central preacher's chair, while Keith Harris was valiantly trying to make an announcement. But that's okay, because one of Keith's boys was in the lower chancel, in the angel choir, from which he clearly wanted to distance himself, playing with the wrapped socks he had brought to the manager as his gift—handing the package back and forth, then twirling it, twisting, tossing it up in the air, then doing a three-step drop like Rex Grossman looking for a wide receiver running a pattern out in the congregation somewhere. The sanctuary was literally packed at 4 p.m. last Wednesday.

Although we have resisted the temptation to go professional with our pageant, not so everywhere. The "Tempo" section of the *Tribune* last Tuesday featured a megachurch in Plano, Texas, where "brightly colored angels with fluttering 12-foot-long organza gowns, shiny headbands, and red wings, fly over a sanctuary filled with 6,500 spectators. . . . The angels hang six stories up, suspended from harnesses attached to 150-foot-long tracks on the sanctuary's ceiling. Fifteen operators with wired headsets control the angels' movements toward the stage where shepherds with real sheep herald the arrival."

Now that's a Christmas pageant!

What do you suppose it was actually like out on that hillside when the shepherds were keeping their sheep, when an angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and the shepherds were terrified, and the angel said, "Do not be afraid. I am bringing you good news of great joy, for to you is born this day a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord"? The two key words in that, I think, are *glory* and *afraid* and a third actually—*Savior.* Glory—Afraid—Savior.

So there they were, doing what shepherds do at night, which is pretty much nothing, sitting by a fire, dozing, wrapped in a cloak, every now and then peering out into the darkness to see if everything is all right.

What happened when the angel came and glory shown?

There are no fewer than twenty-five Hebrew words translated by one English word: *glory.* In Hebrew, glory means the effect a person or a thing has, the impact, the aura, the right stuff. Assyria's glory was its army; Lebanon's glory was its legendary cedars. The glory of God is the presence of God, the experience of the Lord's presence, the effect God has on the one experiencing it—and in the Bible, the agent is often an angel. An angel is

one who brings you a message from God, ushers you into God's presence, God's glory.

It's a little hard to pin down objectively. Personal religious experience always is. The philosopher William James, in his classic *Varieties of Religious Experience,* wrote,

> It is as if there were in human consciousness a sense of reality, of objective presence, a perception of what we may call "something there." (p. 58)

Glory is the experience of "something there." We experience it differently, of course—standing in front of three panels of glorious water lilies as Claude Monet painted them, or looking up at Georgia O'Keefe's "Clouds" against a bright blue sky at the Art Institute. Letting the strains of Samuel Barber's gorgeous, passionate "Adagio for Strings" surround me will do it for me as will a deeply human experience, the privilege of being a pastor when human life begins or ends.

Something happened out on that hillside that reminded those shepherds that they were in the presence of God, and it scared them to death. Even though the angel is quick to reassure them that the news is good, they are afraid.

Fear of what? Fear that that we are not ultimately or fully in control? Fear that there is really more to reality than we can understand, compute, analyze, or control? Fear that there really is an ultimate reality that created us, cares about us, has plans for us, interrupts our lives randomly, surprisingly, startles us with mystery and love and hope and possibility; fear that God might actually want us to get up and do something, might really want us to leave something behind and risk something somewhere? The kind of "fear of the Lord" the Old Testament says is the beginning of wisdom?

It's the angel that stirs all this up out on the quiet hillside. The angel that says, "Pay attention. You are living in the presence of Almighty God, and you just might miss something very important if you keep sitting there dozing around the fire, all wrapped up in your security blankets."

No one painted angels better than Italian Renaissance artists: serene, beautiful, pastel wings of blue, violet, pink, and gorgeously robed, blonde, serene. They are omnipresent, everywhere in Florence and on a lot of Christmas cards this season, it seemed to me. Some of the best in the world are in the Monastery of San Marcos in Florence, where a monk by the name of Fra Angelico, who lived in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, decorated and ornamented the walls of the monks' cells and the altar and

almost every flat surface with sublime art. My favorite is the "Annunciation," in which the angel appears to young Mary. It hangs on a wall at the top of a steep stairway and is simply one of the most sublime pieces of art anywhere, I think.

I love Italian Renaissance angels because they remind me that I live in the presence of beauty, that the world, God's world, is a beautiful place, that it is important not to be in such a hurry that I miss God's gift of beauty, extraordinary and everyday beauty. And furthermore, those angels are reminders that you and I live out our lives in the presence of the holy, the glory of God, and it can interrupt our routine, as W. H. Auden put it, quietly or suddenly, abruptly, and ask us to get up and do something.

I love the pastel, beautiful angels, but there are other angels that might actually take us a little closer to what happened out on that hillside where glory shone all around. Good friends gave me a little print one time. It has two wonderfully cartoon-like, crazy, bizarre stick figures with broad, wildly colored midsections and spindly arms and legs, stringy hair. One is standing on its hands, legs askew; hair hanging straight down, peering out at the world. The other figure seems to be crazily pointing at the first figure, and there is an inscription, which I love, that reads:

> Most people don't know that there are
> angels whose only job is to make
> sure you don't get too comfortable
> and fall asleep and miss your life.

That's what happened out on the hillside when the shepherds decided to get up and run to Bethlehem. And that, I propose this morning, is what the pageants are about and all the singing of carols and sermons and cantatas.

It's all about the angel's startling reminder that we live in the presence of beauty and holiness, that when God decided to come to us in all God's beauty and holiness, it was in the one human event all of us have in common: birth, and that it was an ordinary birth—not in the king's palace, but in a stable behind a crowded inn in the small, nondescript town of Bethlehem.
And it is about getting up and going to do something, going somewhere, being willing to leave certainties and securities behind, and running to Bethlehem to see a savior, the one whose birth and whose life and love—and whose call to follow—can change your life, can make an enormous difference in the way you live your life, can literally save your life from boredom, apathy, and from fear; can save your life from drifting by giving you something big enough to live for and beautiful and true enough to die for.

“And in that region, there were shepherds living in the fields. And an angel of the Lord appeared and the glory of the Lord shone and they were filled with fear. And the angel said, “Do not be afraid; for behold I bring you good news of great joy which will come to all people: for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord. . . . And the shepherds said to one another”—and across twenty centuries, to you and me—“Let us go now to Bethlehem.

Thanks be to God. Amen.